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## The Problem of Orality and Literacy

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## Summary

“The medium is the message” declares Marshall McLuhan’s well-known adage. But what exactly does this saying mean, and is it true? And if it is, how does it apply to the Christian message, and to the “message” of theology? Even more basically, *why* should the medium affect the message – in other words, how can we formulate *theologically* this relationship? This is the question this thesis has set itself to answer. To provide a focus for my research, I have looked for already existing studies on the topic. One of a few such works is Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, a book in which two important media of communication, orality and writing, are assigned a key role. My strategy was to examine Pickstock’s approach, evaluate and critique it, in this way identify those theological concepts that are essential for a systematic theological formulation of the problem of orality and literacy considered within the larger framework of the medium and the message of theology, and then propose a theological framework or model that fits these criteria.

Before this key part of the thesis the Introduction contains a review of previous research, in different fields of theology. Although little doctrinally defined appraisal exists with regard to the problem of orality and literacy, , biblical studies, church history, as well as practical theology, but also other disciplines within theology have long been aware of the influence on the “message” of the different media – especially the spoken and written word – of communication. To cite just one example, questions concerning the oral (?) context of New Testament material continue to be objects of interest and debate, which also emphasizes the importance of my topic.

Marshall McLuhan is not a theologian but a media scholar, and thus a research question which deals with orality and literacy, even if its focus is on theology, requires an interdisciplinary outlook. In Chapter One I provide an overview of the most important topics and developments in the field that was initially called orality-literacy studies but has since widened its scope to include media ecology,<sup>549</sup> multimodality, sensual culture studies, and media philosophy, among others. While based on their phenomenological approach,

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<sup>549</sup> The study of communication systems as environments.

McLuhan, Ong and others saw the role of the media of communication mainly in affecting cognition, the New Literacy studies decry this view and call attention to the role of social and political factors. At the same time, anthropology and ethnography underline the western bias toward the “literary episteme” at the expense of other sense modalities in communication. For Jacques Derrida “writing,” rather than orality, describes the working of language and meaning; indeed, for some forms of postmodern philosophy everything is really a “text.”

Although they should not and cannot reduce or explain away the theological interpretation, the social sciences, among them media ecology, function as “handmaids” of theological awareness in my argument when, in the main part of the thesis, I first compare Catherine Pickstock’s handling of orality and writing with those of the different approaches reviewed in Chapter One. My conclusions here are not unambiguous. On the one hand, I demonstrate that the way Pickstock describes and interprets the characteristic of orality and writing in *After Writing* is also phenomenologically based, which is why on some matters she arrives at the same conclusions as the scholars in Chapter One. On the other hand, however, because of the Radical Orthodox “constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts” – anti-modern and anti-postmodern, with its foundations in the Platonic-Christian synthesis, but with a postmodern emphasis on language and signs in meaning-making – within which she operates, her metaphorical, analogical understanding of orality (and writing) does not allow for all the biologically, historically, culturally changing variations that define the use of not only spoken and written language, but other media as well. Because of her (Radical Orthodox) repudiation of the knowing subject, orality, writing, but also other sense- and perception-mediated ways of communication cannot be considered as ways of “knowing,” but only ontologically, as the modes of intuiting Being and thus at least remotely participating in the beatific vision. It is because of the – phenomenologically established – features of orality which, Pickstock suggests, are so basic for the workings of the Roman Mass that the liturgy consummates, that is, transcends in what it accomplishes, not only modern – written – spatiality, but also Derrida’s philosophy that is based on “writing.”

The inconsistencies signalled by the discrepancy between the phenomenological method and the “constraining systematic framework,” while closely related to Pickstock’s view of the (human) subject, may be nailed down in especially two conceptual pairs that are basic to systematic theological interpretation: epistemology versus ontology, and immanence versus transcendence. While McLuhan, although he never theorised this theologically, kept the tension – the “kabalistic paradox” – between these pairs, in *After Writing* Pickstock collapses

epistemology into ontology, and assigns immanence (understood as the purely sensorily observable) a wholly negative meaning. Based on Chapter One it seems, however, that if we want to make sense of the relationship between the medium and the message (also of theology), we need a balance between these pairs, which may be achieved by an understanding of subjectivity that is not self-sufficient, but fundamentally relational.

Chapter Three offers one such model when it argues that the concept of the *analogia entis*, as formulated by Eric Przywara and developed in a unique way by Hans Urs von Balthasar, does justice to these requirements in a way that may provide a more satisfactory description of the relationship in question. Przywara's *analogia entis*, I argue, upholds those tensions that he himself regards to be philosophy's inherent contradictions; those between the acts of consciousness (knowledge) and the acts of being, or, from a different point of view, existence and essence. These, in fact, are also the two key aspects of the workings of the different media (eg. orality and writing) that we have considered. Thus, concludes Przywara, human beings exist "within the polarity of the transcendence and immanence of God" – and one aspect of human existence is our living with, and using, different media of communication.

What is missing from Przywara's formulation, however, is an acknowledgement of the distortions due to our fallenness. This is one aspect of (systematic) theology where Hans Urs von Balthasar – partly due to the influence of Karl Barth – developed or corrected Przywara's formulation. This is especially important for our topic, though, because already McLuhan and other media scholars, as well as theologians, called attention to the ways in which different media may distort our natural capacities of perception, thinking and moral behaviour. Von Balthasar's unique approach, whereby he takes seriously both the originary experience of consciousness and the concrete realities of faith – including the existential experience of participating in the liturgy, for example – means that he is aware of sinful humans' need for grace, which comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Once I have identified a suitable theological model, the question is how the validity and usefulness of the suggested framework may be assessed. For this reason, the Conclusion specifies a number of different concrete examples to demonstrate the presence of this polarity of the relationship between orality, literacy as well as other media and the message of theology. One example – closest to Pickstock's first concern – is liturgical theology, where we can most clearly see both the analogically disclosive, mediating, and at the same time the existentially ambiguous side of sense perception and the different media; which is the reason

for the ongoing controversies in the liturgical movement. Another case is that of confessional theology. It would have been beyond the confines of this thesis to analyse the priority given to orality and literacy, or hearing and vision, by different church and confessional traditions, but there is no doubt that this is one area where the relationship between the medium and the message of theology can be most clearly discerned. The role played by the icon in the “visionary East” and of the Word in the West; of the Eucharist in the Catholic, and of preaching in the Protestant tradition; of orality in Pentecostalism and in some Majority World contexts, are only a few examples that underline the reciprocity of the relationship between the medium and the message. Not only that, but – especially if we also involve the social sciences in the equation – we can see how all this has consequences first of all for theological thinking, but also for church history and mission. Last but not least, I suggest, the significance of a theologically increased awareness of the issue is underlined by an engaged theology’s “embeddedness” in 21<sup>st</sup> century life, where the presence of multimedia tools – television, the internet and smartphones, even for faith-related purposes – makes such reflection mandatory.